

Jan 1st, 12:00 AM

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Stacy Hyun Nam Lee

Hong Kong Polytechnic University, stacy.hn.lee@polyu.edu.hk

Li Zhao

University of Missouri, zhaol1@missouri.edu

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Lee, Stacy Hyun Nam and Zhao, Li, "Responding to Sustainability with Sentimental Messages Disseminated through Social Media" (2018). *International Textile and Apparel Association (ITAA) Annual Conference Proceedings*. 52.

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Responding to Sustainability with Sentimental Messages Disseminated through Social Media

Stacy H. N. Lee*, Li Zhao

Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong; University of Missouri, USA

Keywords: Twitter, fast fashion, sustainability, attribution theory

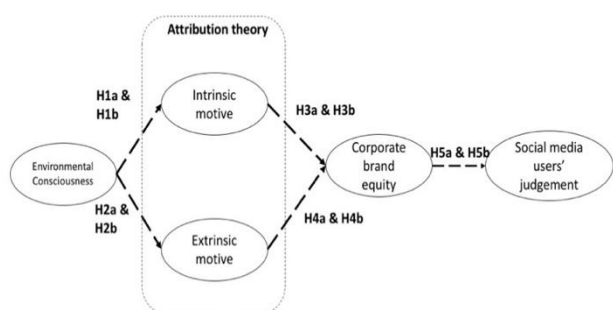
Fast fashion brands are becoming more active in practicing sustainability, and companies such as ZARA, H&M, Gap, and UNIQLO, are tackling green marketing to influence consumers' selections, as well as to forge strategic alliances with suppliers. However, many companies and brands face new challenges in creating ways to interact with consumers through social media, which has shifted the power to structure brand images from marketers to consumers through their online connections and self-created content (Tsai & Men, 2013). Likewise, electronic word-of-mouth communication can act as a medium to share and retweet not only positive opinions of brands, but also negative opinions, which can change potential consumers' perceptions of these brands. An Enthusiastic recommendation by a consumer can be seen by thousands or even millions, but negative feedback may also be shared at this level, which may act as a greater motivating factor driving people to express their dissatisfactions in the form of complaints, which can reach a wide audience on a social media site (Einwiller & Steilen, 2015).

Currently, fast fashion brands seem to communicate their CSR activities via social media platforms, the effect of which can be explained through the attribution theory. Heider (1958) introduced this theory, which states that a person's internal state can be influenced by the disposition of the actor (e.g., the company who claims CSR), and external behavior may be affected by environmental factors (e.g., the external entities outside of the company) (Parguel et al., 2011). Thus, when consumers become knowledgeable about a company's sustainability efforts, they may assume such CSR activities are either the result of internally-motivated behaviors (intrinsic motives) or opportunity-seeking behaviors influenced by external trends (extrinsic motives) (Parguel et al., 2011). Depending on whether the information received is negative or positive, this study aims to explore how consumers view and respond to fashion brands' sustainability-related messages posted on social media.

H&M has been recognized as one of the "100 Most Sustainable Brands in the World" by Forbes in 2017, but recently, H&M was seriously criticized for irresponsible practices, such as racist, religion-related images, and using an artist's work without proper attribution or compensation (Bain, 2018). As H&M has historically produced polarizing communication on sustainability topics, consumers may have varied perceptions about H&M's commitment to sustainability, thereby making it an ideal subject for this study's objective. Thus, we conducted a systematic content analysis of H&M's posted sustainability messages, sorting through 301 sustainability-related tweets. To determine the sentimental value of these tweets as either negative (1-50) or positive (51-100), all 301 tweets were evaluated by three groups of consumers to determine whether they could be considered as positive or negative. Data was collected by a survey company in the spring of 2018, and a total of 258 complete responses were used for data analysis. Scales

that were designed to measure environmental consciousness (3 items) and retailers' intrinsic (3 items) and extrinsic motives (3 items) were adopted from Parguel, Benoit-Moreau & Larceneus (2011), while scales for measuring corporate brand equity were adopted from Yoo & Donthu (2001). Demographic information was also collected. Over 94% of respondents were under 65 years of age, and gender was almost equally distributed. Also, more than 60% accessed Twitter more frequently than once per day.

Attribution theory: Comparing Positive and Negative Tweets



For *positive tweets*, the measurement model showed a good model fit ($\chi^2 = 143.99$, CFI of .95, RMSEA of .05), and the structural model indicated as $\chi^2 = 213.33$, CFI of .90, RMSEA of .07. Environmental consciousness had a significant impact on both intrinsic (H1a: $\beta = .59$, $p < .001$) and extrinsic motives (H2a: $\beta = .59$, $p < .001$). The effect of intrinsic motives on perceived corporate brand equity was significant (H3a: $\beta = .67$, $p < .001$) but the

same did not hold true for extrinsic motives (H4a: $\beta = .10$, $p = .18$). Corporate brand equity was found to be positively related to social media users' judgement (H5a: $\beta = .359$, $p < .001$). For *negative tweets*, the measurement model showed an acceptable model fit ($\chi^2 = 148.265$, CFI of .96, RMSEA of .08), and the structural model equation was indicated as $\chi^2 = 221.91$, CFI of .91, RMSEA of .05. Environmental consciousness had a significant impact on both perceived intrinsic (H1b: $\beta = .39$, $p < .001$) and extrinsic motives (H2b: $\beta = .27$, $p < .001$). Intrinsic motives showed a positive effect (H3b: $\beta = .38$, $t = 3.11$, $p = .002$) on perceived corporate brand equity, but no influence was found for extrinsic motives (H4b: $\beta = .21$, $p = .08$). Corporate brand equity was therefore found to positively affect social media users' judgement (H5b: $\beta = .245$, $p = .002$).

These findings suggest that when environmentally-conscious consumers evaluate communication through social media, they respond to both the perceived intrinsic and extrinsic motives of sustainability messages. More importantly, though consumers respond to both motives of attribution, intrinsic motives are key to actually building strong corporate brand equity. Corporate brand equity is highly imperative, as it may help create a positive and strong social media presence and affect consumers' perception of brands. Although this study provides interesting results, there are limitations. Although 301 tweets were sorted as either as positive or negative, this study only used 10 positive and 10 negative tweets. Thus, future studies can explore all tweets that we sorted out related to sustainability. Also, H&M was used to explore the effect of positive and negative tweets in this study, which suggests the need for expanding the pool of fashion brands to include in future studies. Finally, this study recommends additional research on how to improve message content to make it more memorable, and therefore shared by the core consumers of fashion brands, to help improve all fashion brands' overall communication efforts.

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